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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000144

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/26/2018

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: FREED JOURNALIST DESCRIBES THREE MONTHS IN JAIL

REF: A. MINSK 129

[1](#)B. 07 MINSK 465

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Journalist Aleksandr Sdvizhkov thanked the United States for its role in securing his release before prison damaged his health even further. He held out hope that Lukashenko would bend before international pressure and make Aleksandr Kozulin's furlough permanent. Sdvizhkov spoke of the continued need for a free press in Belarus, although he will likely chose to emigrate in the near future out of fear of persecution. Sdvizhkov linked his imprisonment to his investigative reporting, although post believes it more likely that editing an independent paper before the 2006 elections meant he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. End summary.

Three Months of "Negative Experience"

[1](#)2. (C) A visibly weak Aleksandr Sdvizhkov told Ambassador February 26 that he did not realize ahead of time how horribly prison would affect him. Admitting that the three months he served aged him, Sdvizhkov agreed with Solzhenytsin's description of prison as "negative experience." In addition to the eyesight and hearing problems the Supreme Court referred to in its decision to commute his sentence (ref A), Sdvizhkov told Ambassador he lost six teeth while imprisoned. He expressed his gratitude to Ambassador and the United States for helping secure his early release.

Kozulin's Permanent Release More Likely with Firm Pressure

[1](#)3. (C) Sdvizhkov opined that a real chance exists for Lukashenko to release Kozulin permanently because the dictator "is capable of spontaneous decisions and often succumbs to pressure, especially when the pressure reaches the required level." Weak actions, Sdvizhkov held, would only make Lukashenko stronger.

Free Press Still Important

[1](#)4. (C) Sdvizhkov granted that former readers of closed newspapers by and large now followed news online. However, he argued for a continued role for independent newspapers. He already visited the offices of independent weekly "Belgazeta," which he termed the last of the Mohicans.

Sdvizhkov said internet sites devoted much of their time to reporting the news and consequently fail to offer analysis. A national weekly analytical journal along the lines of "The Economist" could play an important role in Belarus, he added.

Considering Self-Imposed Exile to Continue Writing

15. (C) Sdvizhkov remarked that the regime would find a way to persecute him if he stayed in Belarus, making it safer to go abroad to continue writing. The journalist already selected a title, "Ordinary Victims" his upcoming book about those convicted unjustly for non-political crimes. He described for Ambassador three fellow inmates -- including former Belneftekhim Director General Aleksandr Borovskiy (ref B)-- jailed for allegedly running afoul of GOB-sponsored racketeering.

Jailed at the Request of the Muslim Brotherhood?

16. (C) Sdvizhkov suggested that his arrest was about much more than reprinting cartoons of the prophet Mohammed. However, rather than emphasizing his former paper's independence as reason for his prosecution, Sdvizhkov detailed for Ambassador alleged ties between the Muslim community leader who complained about the cartoons, Abu-Bekir Shabanovich, and groups with links to terrorism. Sdvizhkov claimed funding from Libya, Iran and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood was going into the construction of a local mosque, a rumor that has surfaced before. Some foreign element tipped off the Belarusian Presidential Administration that Sdvizhkov was investigating, according to Sdvizhkov. (Note: Post will follow up with Sdvizhkov when his health has improved to learn more about any substance to these

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accusations. End note.)

Comment: In Belarus Even the Paranoid Have Real Enemies

17. (C) Whatever the merits of Sdvizhkov's claim of terrorist financing for Minsk's moderate Muslims, post still sees a heavy-handed attempt to destroy an independent newspaper as the main reason behind his imprisonment. Sdvizhkov's insistence that Lukashenko will compromise -- including setting Kozulin free -- only in the face of strong pressure fits perfectly with post's assessment.

STEWART